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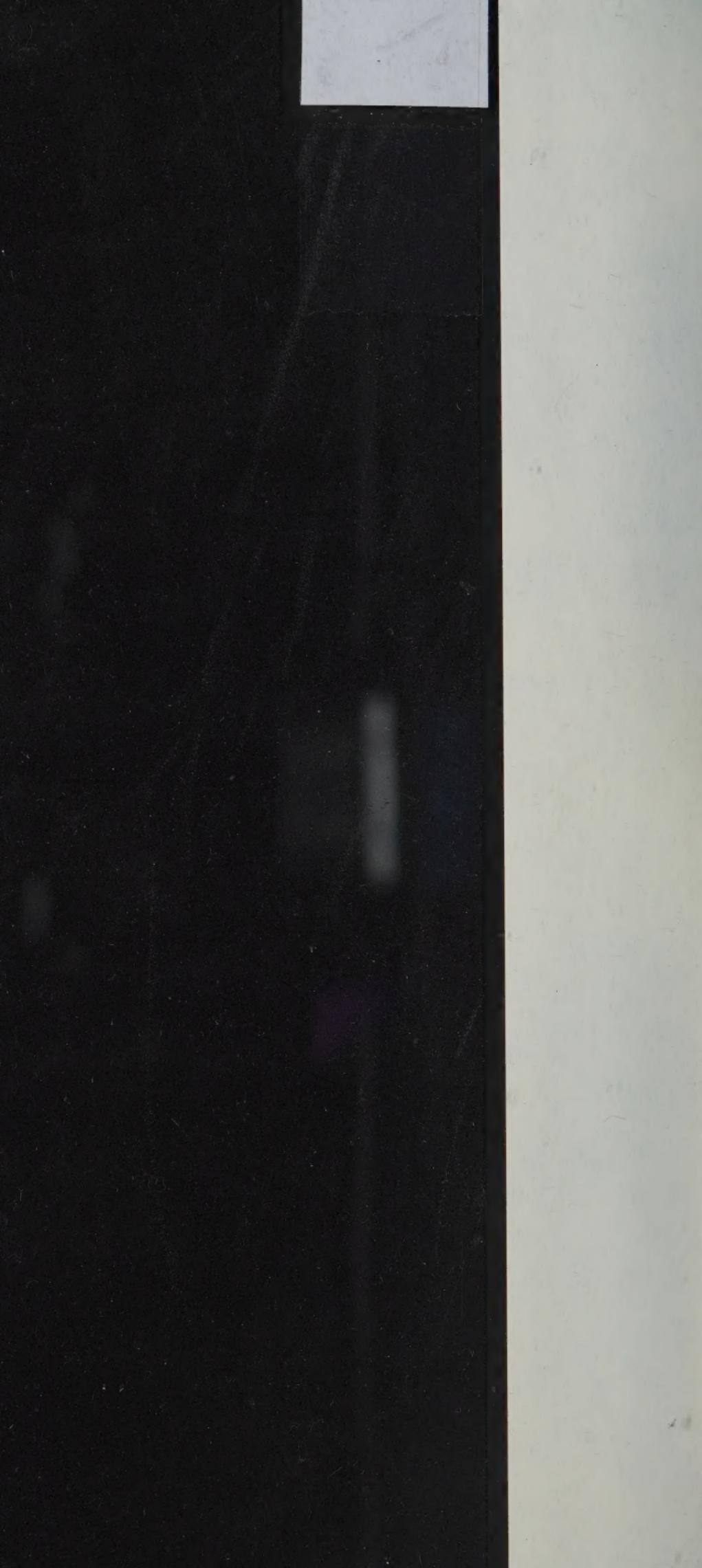
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HELPING YOUR CHILD LEARN



Hon. Bette Stephenson, M.D., Minister
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How Does Your Child Learn?

Children learn at a remarkable rate right from the moment they're born. The vocabulary of a one-year-old may be three words; by the age of six, that same child may have mastered three thousand words.

Children learn at different rates and in different ways. Many factors affect learning: physical maturity, experiences, exposure to information, and so on. What one person learns easily through a particular learning experience may present difficulties to another.

Despite individual differences, however, children's learning falls into fairly predictable stages: in infancy, children react physically to their surroundings; in the pre-school years, they begin to use symbols; in the elementary school years, they develop an ability to use logic; in adolescence, they begin to understand concepts such as justice, their own existence, and other abstractions.

How Can You Help Your Child Learn?

Attitudes

A child's parents are the first and most important teachers he or she will have throughout the learning process. As a parent, your influence sets the pattern for much of the learning that is to come. If you enjoy reading, for example, your child is likely to enjoy reading too. Your display of confidence in your child's ability will go a long way towards helping him or her develop self-confidence.

Similarly, if you show that you value education, the chances are that your child will too. Encourage natural curiosity and your child will be motivated to learn and to enquire. This desire to learn is a prime factor in education. For most children, their natural curiosity is sufficient motivation; later, the joy of accomplishment will give further incentive.

Experiences

Nearly every situation in your child's growing years provides opportunities for learning, especially if you use the child's questions and initiatives as a starting point. For example, if you are watering flowers in the garden or in an apartment window, your conversation with your child may lead to a discussion of the way flowers grow, their need for water and nutrients, their colours, shapes, and sizes. In the course of each discussion, your child inevitably grasps new concepts, new sensations, new words.

Children often respond best to new learning experiences if these can be related in some way to a concept that they have already mastered. Listen carefully to your child's responses so that your answers to his or her questions can be direct and sufficiently detailed to be useful, yet brief enough to avoid confusing the child.

Your child will find learning skills easier when there is an obvious reason for learning them. For instance, if the child has drawn a picture of a boat and wants it labelled, this may be the ideal time to spell the word "boat" together.

You can enrich and further your child's learning by providing a variety of new experiences. These experiences need not cost a lot of money; in fact, many of the best experiences will probably be free. You can arrange trips or visits to places of local interest: libraries, museums, bus or train stations, airports, farms, harbours, children's theatres — to name but a few.

These experiences can be enriched by discussing with your child what you have both just seen, heard, smelled, or touched. If you ask open-ended questions, that is, questions that require more than a "yes" or "no" or other one-word answer, the learning process will be extended further. "What do you like best about the airplanes?" will usually elicit a more reasoned, more thought-provoking response than "Did you like the airplanes?" By caring enough to provide new learning situations and sharing your time and interests, you cannot fail to help build your child's store of knowledge and love of learning.

Interest in the school

When your child starts school, your special role in the education process does not come to an end. Your interest in your child's progress — and not just at report time — can provide valuable motivation and encouragement. Ask your child about his or her school work; help with it at times. Keep in touch with your child's teachers; there will be times, especially in the earlier years, when you can provide them with useful insights about your child. Take an active interest in what goes on at school; some schools encourage parents to assist teachers in the classroom. Certainly your child will notice and respond favourably to your involvement.

A Few Suggestions

Here are some simple suggestions for enjoying and helping with your child's learning. Not all suggestions are appropriate in all situations or for all families; the list is offered merely as a springboard for further constructive discussion about children and learning.

- It often helps to show that you care about your child's learning; but try not to appear anxious. If you are anxious, try to disguise it; your anxiety will be felt by the child and will only hamper his or her efforts.
- Encourage your child to measure current achievements against his or her own previous efforts, not those of brothers or sisters; the last thing you would want to do is foster counterproductive sibling rivalry. Comparisons with other children are generally not helpful.
- Show that you have confidence in your child's abilities and look for your child's particular strengths. A child who develops self-confidence at home will often succeed in the rough-and-tumble of the outside world where the real competition begins.
- Set goals for your child that are challenging but obtainable; in this way, you will avoid both boredom and frustration.
- Help your child to realize that making mistakes is an inevitable part of the learning process. By all means criticize carelessness or lack of attention, but not the mistakes themselves.
- Your child is a thinking being, but not a miniature adult. Learning to learn takes time and helping to learn requires patience. Encourage your child's curiosity and stimulate it whenever you can.
- Teach by example. Your child will adopt your attitude towards education, just as he or she will often follow the example you set in self-discipline, neatness, cleanliness, thoroughness, and perseverance.

More Information

Other pamphlets in this series tell more about education in Ontario. For copies, please contact:

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